Estuary Habitat Restoration Act Fact Sheet
May 3, 2002

The Estuary Habitat Restoration Act: A Good Start

The Estuary Habitat Restoration Act, authored by the late Senator John Chafee and championed by Senator Lincoln Chafee, established the Estuary Habitat Restoration Council, which was charged with designing a national strategy to preserve one million acres of estuary habitat over 10 years. Although the plan was required by November, 2001, the change in administrations delayed the start of the council meetings as President Bush had to appoint new officials at the agencies involved. Under the legislation, the Army Corps of Engineers is responsible for completing estuary protection and restoration projects identified by the Council.

Federal Funding of Estuary Program: Lost Opportunities

The Act also authorized Congress to appropriate $315 million in federal funds for estuary restoration projects through fiscal year (FY) 2005. However, due to the delay in completing the national strategy, Congress provided only $200,000 in FY 2002 to the Army Corps of Engineers to hire staff. The president's budget includes $100,000 in FY 2003 for similar purposes.

Last year, Senator Chafee offered an amendment to the FY 2002 Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill to provide $2 million in funding in order to get the Estuary Habitat Restoration Partnership Program off the ground. While Senators Harry Reid (D-NV) and Pete Dominici (R-NM), Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development, stated on the Senate floor that they would work to persuade the House/Senate Conference Committee to include Chafee's request, the $2 million was left out of the final legislation.

This year, Senator Chafee has joined sixteen other Senators in writing to Senators Reid and Dominici to request that the Senate version of the FY 2003 Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill include $10 million in funding for the estuary program. Release of the national strategy significantly increases the possibility of the Senate and Congress approving Chafee's funding request.

America's Estuaries: Preserving and Restoring Imperiled Resources

In their March 20th letter to Senators Reid and Dominici, Chafee and his colleagues noted the environmental and economic importance of estuaries. "Estuaries are a critical component of our nation's environmental and economic well-being. They provide essential habitat for a wide range of marine and terrestrial plants and animals; hold great value as natural filters for runoff; and protect inland areas from flooding during storm events."

The letter continued: "Estuaries play a large role in the nation's economy by acting as the breeding grounds for the country's commercial fish and shellfish species and by driving coastal industries that attract millions of tourists and recreational users every year. A fully-functioning estuary means a vibrant community, both on land and in the water. Despite their importance, estuaries across the country suffer from the many competing and increasing demands placed upon them, and billions of dollars are needed to continue to restore, protect and enhance these imperiled resources."

Rhode Island's Estuaries

Rhode Island's estuaries face a number of challenges. Human pressures, including development, pollution and invasive species place enormous stress on natural estuarine systems. Community partners, including the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), Department of Transportation (RIDOT), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Save the Bay, and local volunteers, are working together to restore estuaries across the state. With a small amount of federal seed money from the Estuary Restoration Program, estuaries such as those found in Silver Creek Marsh along Rt. 114 will be restored.

A Rhode Island Example: Silver Creek Marsh

The Silver Creek Marsh in Bristol has been identified as a restoration priority by RIDOT, the Town of Bristol, Save the Bay, and other community groups. Plans call for the restoration of tidal flows to the marsh by removing tidal restriction and re-grading areas that were filled in the past. The project, which is estimated to cost between $600,000 and $900,000, will benefit finfish and shellfish, including game fish and oysters.